

FAIRY TALES ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

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The Evolution of Tales

Forgotten Origins, moral changes, and age-old stories...

I have chosen these particular tales simply because they are ones I like best, and the ones I find the most interesting. The differences between the earliest versions of the stories found and the versions printed by Perrault and the Grimm brothers is often surprising, and show the different concerns of the people who took the stories up, changed them to reflect their viewpoints, and passed them on.

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Little Red Riding Hood

Little Red Riding Hood, the girl who foolishly pauses to talk with a wolf and ends up being gobbled up by him in bed...

Or Does She?

Not in the earliest versions of the tale, no. Though we don't get told the colour of her cape, the heroine of one version uses her wit to escape unharmed. Rather than a dire warning it appears to be a coming-of-age story in which the girl is not punished for turning from a child to a woman, she tricks the wolf and escapes. An Italian tale follows a similar pattern - the grandmother has been eaten by an ogress, and as the girl escapes she is assisted by a gate and a river to whom she'd shown kindness on her way there. In both tales, the wolf/ogress encourages the girl to unknowingly eat part of her grandmother's flesh. In both, the girl escapes when the false grandmother lets her go outside to answer the call of nature, with a rope tied to her. In one, she ties it to a tree and runs away, in the other she ties it to a goat, and is chased by the ogress but the river lets the girl through and sweeps the ogress away.

Societies which practised cannibalism in the past believed that by eating their enemy, they would take on his strength. The girl in these stories (though she refuses the food in the second one) is growing up and taking on the knowledge and wisdom of her grandmother. She can deal with the threat of the wolf in her own way.

The Ones That Didn't Get Away

Perrault has his Red Riding Hood gobbled up, followed by a verse informing us that "pretty girls, who're bred as pure as pearls, should question the words addressed to them by men". There she and her grandmother stay in the wolf's stomach, the old lady punished for foolishness in allowing him in, the little girl punished for flirting with strangers.

The version given to us by the Grimms also has Little Red being devoured by the wolf, but she and her grandmother are rescued by a woodcutter who chops open the wolf's belly, and out they pop alive, if a little shocked. On her way to her Grandmother's house, Little Red stops to eat wild strawberries:

" '... Just another one. And one more. This is the last . . . Well, this one . . . Mmmm.' The red fruit peeped invitingly through the leaves in the grassy glade, and Little Red Riding Hood ran back and forth popping strawberries into her mouth".

At the end of the tale, the girl tells her mother "We must always keep to the path and never stop. That way, we come to no harm!"

Perrault and the Grimms both tell us to be good, don't stray from the path, beware of men, and especially, repress any interest in sex. The Grimm's grandmother and girl need a man to save them from their peril, while the original heroines take on the wisdom which comes with age, and survive on their own wits.

Cinderella

Cinderella, one of the best-known fairy tales, has over 340 variations and can be traced back as far 850-60 CE (Common Era), where a version was written down in China.

The Chinese Cinderella was taken down from a family servant, but the text makes clear that the audience already knew the tale. The ill-treatment from the stepmother and stepsisters, the festival where Cinderella (Yeh-hsien) loses her shoe, the local warlord who wishes to marry the owner of the shoe, are all there. There is also a magical golden fish which appears in the pond and comforts Yeh-hsien, until the stepmother discovers this and has it killed.

From Animal Helper to Fairy Godmother

The bones of the fish in the Chinese story work the magic which helps Cinderella. In "Rashin Coatie", the Scottish version of the tale, Cinderella's dead mother returns in the form of a calf, who helps Cinderella. Even when the calf is killed, it continues to help and protect her. In the version collected by the Grimm brothers a hazel tree grows over the dead mother's grave, and the tree shakes down the dresses Cinderella wears to the ball. It also shelters the doves which help and protect her, and in the end peck out the sisters' eyes. The Grimms' version also includes the sisters hacking off their heels and toes in order to squeeze their feet into the shoes.

Perrault's version gives Cinderella a godmother with no apparent connection to the spirit of her mother; it is this version which gives us the pumpkin, mice and fairy godmother, and which has become the most well-known version of the tale. The dead mother (and Cinderella's ashes imply mourning) who watches over her daughter disappears.

There are also similarities between the Cinderella story and "Donkeyskin"; there are many tales in which the heroine is a servant who dresses up in magical clothing and wins over the Prince, but is unrecognized in her rags by day. In "Donkeyskin" however, the heroine is not maltreated by her stepmother, but runs away from home to escape the incestuous intentions of her own father, which is no doubt why the story is little-known today. It was included in Perrault's collection of tales, and variations on it abound.

The Sleeping Beauty

Sleeping Beauty, or Briar Rose in the Grimms' telling, endures more hardships than a pleasant hundred years' sleep in her earlier incarnations.

The version told by the Brothers Grimm, ending with the Princess being awakened by the chaste kiss of the rescuing Prince, is now the best-known, the brothers having shorn the story of its elements of cannibalism, rape and adultery.



The Sleeping Beauty, E F Brewtman

The Not-So-Chivalrous Prince

Marina Warner traces the origins of the Sleeping Beauty story to a tale which appeared in an Authurian romance, "Perceforest". This was first printed in 1528. This may have influenced the version which Perrault drew on, Giambattista's "Sun, Moon and Talia".

Instead of a Prince, our hero is a King, who comes across the Sleeping Beauty (Talia) in the woods. As she won't wake up no matter how much he shouts, he rapes her instead of awakening her with a kiss, then goes home to his wife. Talia, still sleeping, gives birth to twins (Sun and Moon). One day one of them sucks the splinter out of her finger when trying to suckle, and Talia wakes up.

A year later the King finds himself in the same part of the wood, and drops in to discover that his sleeping beauty is awake and his two children are healthy and well. His childless wife is none too happy about this, and tricks the children into coming to the court, whereupon she (like Snow White's stepmother) orders the cook to kill them and cook her a delicious meal from them. The cook serves her goat kid instead.

The Queen then summons Talia to the court, and prepares to have her burnt at the stake for sleeping with her husband, even though Talia was in a comatose state at the time. The King comes in just in time; the Queen taunts him that she fed him his own children. and he has her thrown onto the fire.

The cook then admits to his deception and the children are revealed to be safe. The King marries Talia, and all live happily ever after.

The Ogress Mother-in-Law

Perrault rang his own changes on this version. The Prince does not even kiss the sleeping Princess, she just happens to wake up as he kneels beside her. However, he is afraid to take her home and marry her because his mother is an ogre with a fondness for eating children, so he sneaks to the woods to visit his love for a few nights each week. She gives birth to two children, Aurora and Day. When the old king dies, the Prince becomes King, and makes his marriage public.

He then skips off to war, leaving the kingdom and care of his wife and children to his mother, apparently having forgotten her taste for human flesh. The ogress soon decides that she will eat the children, and then the queen. The cook saves them as usual, but the ogress discovers his deception. As she is about to have them all thrown into a vat filled with snakes and vipers, the King arrives home, and his mother is so distraught that she throws herself into the vat instead.

The behaviour of the Prince/King in Perrault's version seems less explicable than Basile's, even if more moral. It is not really surprising that the Grimms chose to cut out this element altogether, and concentrate on Briar Rose's enchantment, ending with her waking. The earlier versions of the story do give us more insight into the social history of the time, though, where a childless wife was often replaced with one who could provide children, and the tensions between the mother-in-law and the new wife (who was ultimately taking over the place of the mother) were strong.

Snow White

The child with skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as a raven's wing or an ebony window frame, appears in many guises.

In "The Juniper Tree", the child as red as blood and as white as snow is a son, who is again mistreated by his stepmother, killed, and fed to his father in a stew. His half-sister buried his bones with his dead mother, at which point he turns into a bird, and eventually kills his own murderer.

From Mother to Stepmother

The tale of the girl driven out by her jealous and wicked stepmother is, as usual, best-known through Disney. What is less often known is that the Grimm brothers made a major alteration to the story between the first

edition of their collection of tales and the third, in 1819. The story they took down had no stepmother - instead, it was the girl's natural mother who succumbed to murderous jealousy against her own child. This is also found in the Armenian version, "Nourie Hadig", who has perfectly white skin and rosey cheeks, and is therefore named "tiny piece of pomegranite". It is her father who abandons her in the woods, on instructions from his wife, and there are no dwarves. Instead, Nourie Hadig finds a sleeping Prince whom she must look after for seven years. After a brief complication she marries him when he awakes, only to fall into a sleep herself when she puts on a poisoned ring sent by her mother (who hears of her through the moon rather than a mirror). When the ring is removed she wakes again, and her mother dies from anger.

This was clearly too much for the Grimms, who replaced the mother with a stepmother. As Cinderella shows us, the child of the first wife often was resented and disliked by the new wife (who wanted to make the future of her own children secure, after all), and this version has become the classic. It ends with the evil stepmother dancing herself to death in red-hot shoes. Snow White is not perfect herself - in spite of the instructions of the dwarves, who let her live with them if she keeps house, she opens the door to the stepmother in various guises. On two occasions, it is to appease her vanity - the woman offers to comb her hair and style it, but uses a poisoned comb. Snow White awakens when the dwarves remove the comb from her hair. She puts herself in danger again when a passing woman offers to tie her corset tighter in the current fashion, and then ties the laces so tight that the girl faints. The dwarves loosen them and save her. Finally Snow White is offered a glistening red apple, and cannot resist taking a bite - both the colour and the apple are symbolic of forbidden knowledge, particularly sexual. Her side of the apple is poisoned, and she falls into a deep sleep. She only comes out of it when the Prince who has fallen in love with her beauty is transporting her glass coffin through the woods, and a jolt shakes the piece of apple from her mouth. Unlike Nourie Hadig, Snow White has to be saved by men throughout.

Another short version of the tale gives us a Count and Countess riding through a winter landscape, and it is the Count who desires a young girl as white as the snow, as red as the berries on the trees, and as black as the raven's wing. No sooner than he has wished this and she appears. Not altogether surprisingly the Countess is none too pleased to be presented with a sudden daughter who is more likely a rival; she drops her glove, sends Snow White into the snow to fetch it, and races away in the carriage before the girl returns.

Beauty and the Beast

The Beauty who eventually falls in love with the Beast appears in many forms, the most well-known one generally being attributed to Mme Leprince de Beaumont.

The first story to bear the name of "Beauty and the Beast", however, was published in 1740 by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Vielleneuve. The version by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont was based on de Vielleneuve's tale, and was published in 1757.

A Tale of Two Tales

Mme de Vielleneuve's "The Story of Beauty and the Beast" is long and intricate, and Leprince de Beaumont's version is in some ways an improvement on it. Though she took all the key elements of her story from de Vielleneuve's, she cut the story short by ending it with the Beast's transformation back into a handsome Prince (which, interestingly, does not take place until after the wedding night). Almost half of de Vielleneuve's tale revolves around warring fairies, in an lengthy history of the parentage of the Prince and of Beauty (who turns out to be a Princess), the reason for the curse, and political machinations of the fairy world. Personally I found the second half of the tale soon became tedious. Leprince de Beaumont does also leave out the dream sequences, which I find a pity. She also aimed her telling solidly at children, and here the tale loses its subversive edges. Beaumont tells her readers to be good little girls; Vielleneuve makes numerous digs at the many enforced marriages women had to submit to, and her Beauty ponders that many women are made to marry men far more beastly in nature than her Beast.

The Animal Bridegroom

Beauty and the Beast is one of many fairy tales which feature a "beastly" groom. In "Princess Zeineb and King Leopard", by Jean-Paul Bignon, the Princess is presented to the leopard because her father trespassed on his property, much as in "Beauty and the Beast". "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon" starts in a similar fashion, with a white bear replacing the leopard. Both tales contain a different twist - the animal lovers cast off their animal shapes at night, but must not be seen by their brides in this condition for seven years. As in the story of Cupid and Psyche, the brides can't resist a peek, and have to go on a long and arduous search to find their lovers, who are magicked away as they are seen.

"The Green Serpent", by the prolific Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (whose tales nearly always involved violence, nightmare situations or tortures of some form), gives us another twist on the same theme. Her Princess is endowed by an angry fairy with perfect ugliness. She finds herself afloat on strange and angry seas, but cruelly rejects an offer of help from a hideous green serpent. The serpent saves her life nevertheless, and she continues to recoil from him in horror.

Laidronette then finds herself in a great palace, where she is waited upon by tiny fat men, who inform her that their King is away waging war. The King soon visits her in the night, in the form of a beautiful voice which informs her that he loves her in spite of her ugliness. Her invisible lover returns to her many times, and reveals that he is under a curse, of which there are two years left. He asks for her hand in marriage; she agrees, and promises not to look at him until the two years are up. When she, like Psyche and the others, cannot resist and looks at her husband, he is none other than the green serpent. She spends three years battling her way through various tortures until at last she and her husband are reunited, both regaining their beauty along the way.

Bluebeard

Bluebeard, who keeps the bodies of his murdered wives in a secret chamber, killing each new wife as she discovers it. The tale is often thought to have been based on Gilles de Rais, a Breton nobleman who was hanged in 1440 for the murders of hundreds of children. Their stories don't seem to have that much similarity to me, though, and there is an earlier tale which is much closer to the story of Bluebeard.

The Deaths of the Wives

Breton legends tell the story of Triphine, who married Cunmar the Accursed. As she prayed one day by the family tombs, the ghosts of Cunmar's previous wives warned her that he can killed each of them as they became pregnant. Triphine was pregnant herself, and tried to run away, but was killed by her husband along with the unborn child. Medieval frescos discovered in a church in Brittany show Cunmar handing a small key to Triphine, and Triphine discovering a chamber in which her dead predecessors are hanging.

Why does Bluebeard murder his wives? The tale has its earliest origins in the Bible, as Eve eats from the forbidden tree, disobeying commands and in search of forbidden knowledge. In the Bluebeard story, the spot of blood on the key (or egg) gives the new bride away. Some say his rage is the rage of a man convinced that he has been cuckolded by his wife; Bettelheim suggests that the spot of blood on the key is evidence that the

bride did betray her husband while he was away. Bearing in mind that the storytellers were often older women, another answer seems the most likely to me. The story isn't warning against the moral consequences of sex, but of the practical consequences. Childbirth was one of the principal causes of death. The husband is killing his wife by making her pregnant. It was not unusual for a man to have many wives, as death in childbirth was so common. Rather than being a tale of sadistic serial killers, Bluebeard was a tale of everyday life.

The Various Versions

Perrault's collection of fairy tales includes the traditional Bluebeard who gives his wife a key to his secret chamber, but instructs her not to use it. When she does, she drops the key in the blood in shock, only to find that she cannot wash off the spot of blood. Just before her husband kills her too, her brothers arrive and rescue her, neatly leaving them all with Bluebeard's vast fortune.

The alternate passed on by the Grimm brothers is "Fitcher's Bird". In this, a sorcerer spirits away three sisters to be his brides. He gives them a magic egg which they are instructed to take with them everywhere, and prohibits them from entering a certain room. When the first sister enters it, she finds a basin filled with dead people, and drops the egg. She cannot wash the blood from the egg, and soon joins the people in the basin. The same thing happens to sister number two. The youngest sister outwits the sorcerer by making an effigy of herself from flowers and bones, and placing it in her window. She covers herself in honey and rolls in the feathers of her quilt. Covered in feathers, she escapes unrecognized.

A similar tale is given by Italo Calvino, from Italian folklore. This villain has a silver nose, and again preys upon three sisters. He fixes a flower in their hair, and the room they open leads to hell. When he sees that the flower is charred, he throws them into the flames of hell too. The youngest sister guesses the purpose of the flower, and places it in a jar of water in her room while she goes to open the door. She rescues her sister and hides them in laundry bags which are taken back to their mother. She then hides herself in a laundry bag, along with much of Silver Nose's money.

An old English version is called "Mr Fox". Lady Mary has many lovers, but her favourite is the rich and mysterious Mr Fox. A wedding is agreed on, and the night before it Lady Mary sneaks away to take a peek at the castle of her husband-to-be, which she has never seen. She passes through the first gate, and on through the second in spite of its injunction to "be bol, be bold, but not too bold". Over the third door is added "Lest your heart's blood should run cold" - but still Lady Mary goes in, and there she finds the bodies of murdered women. She runs, but Mr Fox comes in dragging another body behind him. Lady Mary hides behind a cask, and watches as Mr Fox cuts off the hand of the maiden in order to get at her

diamond ring. The hand lands in Mary's lap, but Mr Fox does not look behind the cask, and she escapes.

At the wedding breakfast the next day, Mr Fox comments on the pale looks of his bride-to-be, and she tells the company that she had a terrible dream the night before. She recounts the events of the night as a dream, with Mr Fox interrupting her story with "It is not so, nor was it not so".

At the end of her tale she produces the hand, whereupon her brothers jump up and hack Mr Fox to pieces with their swords. Shakespeare refers to this version of the tale in "Much Ado About Nothing" (Benedick, act 1, scene 1).